What Is Gnosticism? Definition and Beliefs Explained

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Gnosticism was a second-century religious movement claiming that salvation could be gained through a special form of secret knowledge.

Adherents believed that the material world was created by a lesser divinity, and only through this esoteric wisdom could one transcend this flawed reality. Central to Gnostic thought was the idea that the true "divine spark" resided within individuals and could be liberated through spiritual enlightenment.1

Early Christian church fathers such as Origen, Tertullian, Justin Martyr, and Eusebius of Caesarea condemned gnostic teachers and beliefs as heretical.

Gnosticism Definition

The term *Gnosticism* (pronounced *NOS-tuh-siz-um*) is derived from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "to know" or "knowledge." This knowledge is not intellectual but mythical and comes through a special revelation by Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, or through his apostles. The secret knowledge reveals the key to salvation.2

Beliefs of Gnosticism

Gnostic beliefs clashed strongly with accepted Christian doctrine, causing early church leaders to be embroiled in heated debates over the issues. By the end of the second century, many Gnostics broke away or were expelled from the church. They formed alternative churches with belief systems deemed heretical by the Christian church.

Key Beliefs

While many variations in beliefs existed among the different Gnostic sects, the following key elements were seen in most of them.

Dualism: Gnostics believed that the world was divided into the physical and

spiritual realms. The created, material world (matter) is evil, and therefore in opposition to the world of the spirit, and only the spirit is good. Adherents of Gnosticism often constructed an evil, lesser god and beings of the Old Testament to explain the creation of the world (matter) and considered Jesus Christ a wholly spiritual God.

God: Gnostic writings often describe God as incomprehensible and unknowable. This idea conflicts with Christianity's concept of a personal God who desires a relationship with human beings. Gnostics also separate the inferior god of creation from the superior god of redemption.

Salvation: Gnosticism claims hidden knowledge as the basis for salvation. Adherents believed that secret revelation frees the "divine spark" within humans, allowing the human soul to return to the divine realm of light in which it belongs. Gnostics, thus, divided Christians into two categories with one group being carnal (inferior) and the other being spiritual (superior). Only the superior, divinely enlightened persons could comprehend the secret teachings and obtain true salvation.

Christianity teaches that salvation is available to everyone, not just a special few, and that it comes from grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9), and not from study or works. The only source of truth is the Bible, Christianity asserts.

Jesus Christ: Gnostics were divided on their beliefs about Jesus Christ. One view held that he only *appeared* to have human form but that he was actually spirit only. The other view contended that his divine spirit came upon his human body at baptism and departed before the crucifixion. Christianity, on the other hand, holds that Jesus was fully man and fully God and that his human and divine natures were both present and necessary to provide a suitable sacrifice for humanity's sin.

Gnosticism in The New Bible Dictionary

"The New Bible Dictionary" gives this outline of Gnostic beliefs:

> "The supreme God dwelt in unapproachable splendour in this spiritual world, and had no dealings with the world of matter. Matter was the creation of an inferior being, the *Demiurge*. He, along with his aides the *archōns*, kept mankind imprisoned within their material existence, and barred the path of individual souls trying to ascend to the spirit world after death. Not even this possibility was open to everyone, however. For only those who possessed a divine spark (*pneuma*) could hope to escape

> from their corporeal existence. And even those possessing such a spark did not have an automatic escape, for they needed to receive the enlightenment of *gnōsis* before they could become aware of their own spiritual condition... In most of the Gnostic systems reported by the church Fathers, this enlightenment is the work of a divine redeemer, who descends from the spiritual world in disguise and is often equated with the Christian Jesus. Salvation for the Gnostic, therefore, is to be alerted to the existence of his divine *pneuma* and then, as a result of this knowledge, to escape on death from the material world to the spiritual."

Gnostic Writings

Gnostic writings are extensive. Many so-called Gnostic Gospels are presented as "lost" books of the Bible, but in fact, did not meet the criteria when the canon was formed. In many instances, they contradict the Bible.

In 1945, a vast library of gnostic documents was discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. Along with the writings of the early church fathers, these supplied the basic resources for reconstructing the Gnostic belief system.3

Gnosticism

- Gnosticism was a second-century religious movement centered on the belief that salvation could be attained through secret knowledge.
- Gnostic beliefs often conflicted with early Christian doctrine, leading to their condemnation as heretical by church leaders.
- Gnosticism emphasized a dualistic worldview, viewing the material world as evil and salvation as the liberation of the "divine spark" within.

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